



089433 Report Distribution

UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D C 20548

CIVIL DIVISION

June 28, 1971

Dear Mr. Ball:

We reviewed the travel and overtime practices followed by the Bureau of Hearings and Appeals (Bureau), Social Security Administration, with respect to its hearing examiners. The examiners travel and work overtime in providing hearings to individuals who disagree with determinations made on their claims for Social Security retirement, survivors, disability, or hospital insurance benefits and rendering decisions with respect to such claims.

In recent years, the Bureau has experienced substantial growth in the number of cases it has received and heard under various titles of the Social Security Act. The Bureau has estimated that this trend will continue and that its overall workload is expected to increase dramatically in the immediate future because of additional responsibilities assigned to it under the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.

Our review indicated that substantial improvements might be made in the Bureau's travel practices. Specifically, our test of the travel records of selected examiners identified numerous instances in which the justification for both intra- and inter-regional travel appeared questionable. Several of the trips involved cross-country travel at considerable expense to the Government.

Our review of overtime worked by hearing examiners during fiscal years 1969 and 1970 showed that some regions, using little or no overtime, handled on the average more cases per examiner than other regions using substantial amounts of overtime.

The details on each of these matters--travel and overtime usage--are discussed below.

IMPROVEMENT POSSIBLE IN
ADMINISTRATION OF TRAVEL

Under Bureau procedures the administration of hearing examiner travel has, to a large extent, been delegated to the various regional hearing representatives. These representatives are responsible for

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approving travel within their respective regions but must obtain the approval of the Bureau central office for any inter-regional travel required.

The examiners visiting other field offices are generally accompanied by a hearing assistant and receive their case assignments from the administrative hearing examiner of the office being visited. According to Bureau officials, most cases are of a nature that does not require the expertise of a particular hearing examiner. Approximately \$400,000 was spent on travel by hearing examiners and their staffs during fiscal year 1970.

We examined the travel records of 24 hearing examiners from 14 of the 63 field offices for fiscal years 1969 and 1970. The 24 employees represented about 8 percent of the hearing examiners employed by the Bureau during fiscal year 1970.

In our opinion, the need for a large portion of the travel of 17 of these 24 examiners was questionable because the travel was made to regional or field offices where the offices visited had an unassigned workload that could be considered lighter than or comparable to the traveler's regular office.

The 17 examiners traveled on 66 different occasions; 50 of the trips appeared questionable when viewed in terms of workload considerations. None of the trips involved special cases which required the skills of a specific individual. The hearing examiners incurred costs totaling about \$10,100 on these 50 trips. We did not determine the costs incurred by any assistants accompanying the examiners.

The following situations are examples of cases identified during our review which we considered questionable.

During fiscal year 1970, an examiner attached to a west coast field office was assigned 15 cases by the administrative hearing examiner of a midwest field office. About the time these cases were assigned, the midwest field office had an unassigned workload of seven cases for each of its regular examiners whereas the west coast office had an unassigned workload of 10 cases per examiner. Since the workload of the field office visited was smaller than that of the hearing examiner's office of origin, the need for this type of assistance and the incurrence of costs appears questionable. Moreover, in this particular case, the examiner took annual leave both enroute to and from the field office visited.

To illustrate other instances of questionable travel, the following table shows seven trips made by an examiner from a southern field office and compares the unassigned case workloads of the examiner's regular office with that of the visited office.

<u>Office visited</u>	<u>Month of visit</u>	<u>Unassigned case workload at time of visit</u>			
		<u>Regular office</u>		<u>Office visited</u>	
		<u>Total</u>	<u>Average per examiner</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Average per examiner</u>
Long Beach, California	2/69	33	11	65	11
Miami, Florida	4/69	30	10	23	12
Orlando, Florida	6/69	34	11	16	8
Raleigh, North Carolina	8/69	61	15	35	12
Miami, Florida	2/70	54	13	70	35
Orlando, Florida	4/70	40	10	15	8
Charlotte, North Carolina	5/70	39	10	35	7

As shown above, on all but two of the trips, the total unassigned caseload in the examiner's regular office exceeded that of the office he visited; and on all but one trip, the average number of unassigned cases per hearing examiner in his regular office was comparable to the workload in the office he visited.

In another instance, an examiner from an east coast office visited a west coast office to assist with the workload. The following month an examiner from that west coast office visited a midwest office to assist with the latter office's workload.

In our opinion, travel between field offices should be made only when the workload situation of a field office warrants outside assistance and then such assistance should be sought from the nearest office with available manpower in relation to its unassigned case workload.

Recommendation

In view of the questionable trips identified by our review, we recommend that the Social Security Administration examine the practices of its various regional offices in authorizing travel for hearing examiners. Such a review should be made with a view toward establishing a Bureau-wide policy as to when intra- and inter-regional travel should be authorized.

NEED TO STUDY THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OVERTIME IN RELATION TO CASES HANDLED

Under existing Bureau practice, each regional hearing representative establishes the policy as to when or under what circumstances overtime will be authorized. The regional policies range from one of authorizing overtime only in emergency situations such as where a

claimant is available only on Saturdays or after normal working hours--as in the case of the San Francisco region--to a more generalized policy of authorizing overtime for the purpose of maintaining a high case disposition rate--as in the case of the Dallas region.

In examining the overtime used by the Bureau during fiscal years 1969 and 1970, we observed that, in certain regions, the average number of case dispositions handled per examiner was high with the use of little or no overtime while, in other regions, the opposite appeared true.

The following table compares overtime with case dispositions of the various regions during fiscal years 1969 and 1970.

<u>Fiscal year</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Total overtime hours</u>	<u>Case dispositions</u>	
			<u>Total</u>	<u>Average per examiner</u>
1969	VII	1,850	4,725	147
	IX	96	4,258	125
	III	1,856	5,872	124
	II	614	2,577	123
	IV	2,140	6,627	122
	V	3,504	4,162	118
	VI	603	2,363	118
	VIII	34	516	103
	I	0	822	91
1970	VII	2,068	5,483	171
	II	540	3,235	162
	IX	0	5,414	159
	IV	2,929	8,059	152
	III	2,678	7,307	149
	I	16	1,110	139
	V	3,759	4,696	138
	VI	1,146	2,535	133
	VIII	11	641	128

As shown above, the San Francisco region (Region IX) ranked high in terms of average number of dispositions per examiner in both fiscal years with little or no overtime being incurred. Region IX was the second highest in terms of dispositions per examiner in fiscal year 1969 with only 96 hours of overtime incurred; in fiscal year 1970 this region ranked third using no overtime.

In contrast, the Chicago region (Region V) incurred the most overtime in both fiscal years without achieving any unusual degree of case dispositions. This region represented the fourth and third lowest region in fiscal years 1969 and 1970 in terms of case dispositions per examiner.

In our view, these statistics indicate that there are a number of regions incurring substantial overtime costs without any marked increase in the rate of case dispositions. While we recognize that the rates of case dispositions are undoubtedly dependent upon many factors--including the extent of hearing examiner travel, the relative experience of the various hearing examiners, the extent and frequency of leave taken, etc.--we believe that the Bureau should determine the reasons for the wide variance of regional case dispositions in relation to overtime used. Conceivably, the regional offices with high case disposition rate/low overtime experience may have devised operating techniques and used supporting staff in a manner that could be applied advantageously to other regional offices.

Recommendation

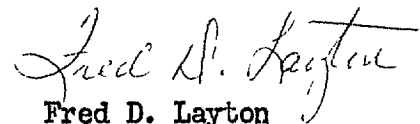
We recommend that the Social Security Administration undertake a comparative study of the operations of the various regional offices to determine the need for a Bureau-wide policy on the use of overtime for hearing examiners.

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Your comments on the matters discussed in this report and advice as to any action taken in connection with these matters would be appreciated.

Copies of this report are being sent today to the Assistant Secretary, Comptroller, and the Director of the HEW Audit Agency.

Sincerely yours,



Fred D. Layton
Assistant Director

Mr. Robert M. Ball
Commissioner of Social Security
Department of Health, Education,
and Welfare